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I am the mother of three children. If you ask them which of them was my first baby, they will say, "None of us. Uncle Corny was her first baby." I've known my brother as long as I've known myself. He was the first love of my life. When we were little, I protected him. Suddenly, when he turned 12, he was my bodyguard. He even thought it was his responsibility to carry a chip on his shoulder on my behalf because I was born with one hand. And as he matured, he took pride in simply adoring me instead of being angry for me. My first best friend, first love, first baby, my introduction to the soul mate concept...that was my brother.

"Was" is a very unnatural verb in reference to someone so real to me. It feels like a betrayal to refer to him in the past tense. I still wait to wake up one day to find it was all a dream. He wasn't John Doe at Shock Trauma. He wasn't the 21st murder victim on the 22nd day of the year. Not only is it unrealistic, it's the one thing I had been convinced I couldn't survive. I'd often said things like, "If I ever lose my brother, I will be quiet for the rest of my life. What else would there be to say?" or "They better make the hole big enough to bury us both." I have two brothers left and that doesn't matter. The truth is, there was only one David Thomas, and I don't have anymore of those left. So it's unfair that he was murdered and the world just kept going like nothing happened.

When he was killed, my other brothers, my cousins and I wanted to find the person who did it. No doubt, we could think of ways to get justice. I couldn't wait for the police to find the guy so I could spit in his face. My male family members certainly had more violent plans for the culprit. Then...we saw Corny's body. Rage turned into confusion. Confusion erupted into devastation. Devastation morphed into regretful acceptance. Acceptance birthed a sad wisdom.

Wisdom is amazingly stubborn. Once you have it, you can't pretend that you don't...it won't let you. A dead body is a dead body. All the justice in the world won't bring it back to life. If I spit my mouth dry at the murderer, if my family beat the life out of him, if a jury executed him...I would never wake up to find my brother protecting me again. There would just be one more dead body. Nothing about one more dead body brings me peace. I can't find anything that feels just about another family looking at a dead body.

Nobody wants to die in vain. Seeing the body of my first love, I realized that his death would mean nothing if justice meant killing again. I want life in return for my brother's death. He is worth forgiveness in return for violence. He is worth healing in return for devastation. It's not that he "was" worth life. All the rage & pain make him a "was". But when talking of true justice for him, he still "is". He exists in the beauty of mercy, not in the destruction of execution.

All of our humanness exists in forgiveness in the face of violence. It's only reflex that tells us that death warrants more death. But it's wisdom that reminds us that a person who is murdered deserves for those seeking justice to be at their noblest. The person deserves their death to bring out the best in those still alive. We can't possibly be at our best when justice looks like one more dead body.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore." This is one of America's basic ideals. It speaks of mercy and promises second chances. It boasts that being American means being strong enough to give our best to those who are at their worst. How then, can it be American to murder the wretched refuse bred on our own teeming shores, and call it justice? If that's the modern American ideal, then what are we really saying? That we are all out of ideas? Fresh out of hope? So disillusioned by our own society that all we can do is wash our hands of the "refuse" and pile their bodies in the corner?

I think we're stronger than that. I know there is much work to be done to end violence in this country. It's too late for that work to save my brother. But it's never too late to recognize which solutions are noble and humane. There's still time to decide that being American means handing out justice in wisdom, not in revenge and reflex. I would be happy to address any questions or comments.